

Teachers' Perceptions of Students and Global Awareness

Jing Hong Tao

Abstract

The importance of global awareness has recently been emphasized in Chinese government's educational policy and foreign language curriculum. However, empirical research about the concept of global awareness, students' attitudes and school activities has not been explored sufficiently. This study presents a qualitative case study of the global awareness of English teachers and their students at one high school in Henan province in China. Interviews and focus group interviews were used as ways of collecting data, and grounded theory was used to analyze the data. Three themes were found connecting with students' attitudes to global awareness, global learning activities in and beyond school and school trips and exchange projects. Implications of the study may serve as reference points for educators, administrators and policy-makers.

Keywords: global awareness, global learning, global issues, intercultural communicative competence, teachers' beliefs and practices, EFL teachers, students, China

Introduction

Recently, global awareness has been emphasized in China's national teaching guidelines. On February 28, 2010, the Chinese government released the draft copy of "The National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020)" (hereinafter referred to as "the Guidelines"). It states in Chapter 16, "To meet the requirement of opening up the Chinese economy and society to the world, large numbers of talents shall be cultivated that are imbued with a global vision, well-versed in international rules, and capable of participating in international affairs and competition" (p. 34). We can see that the objective of cultivating talents is to cultivate international talents who have a global vision.

Global awareness was also highlighted in the English curriculum standards in 2001. The objective of English education at the basic stage is to develop students' comprehensive language competence which includes language skills, language knowledge, emotion and attitudes,

learning strategies and cultural awareness. Cultural awareness was explained in more detail at different levels. The documents showed that the eighth level of the goal of cultural awareness is to develop global awareness through learning English and world culture. The complete descriptions of the eighth and ninth level objectives are: to know culture concept and background in communication; to have respectful and tolerant attitudes to other countries' culture; to be concerned with current events; and to have stronger global awareness. The curriculum goal is to develop intercultural awareness and basic intercultural communicative competence and to broaden international perspectives in-depth. International perspective is one aspect of emotion and attitudes (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2003).

Developing intercultural communicative competence was advocated in China's English curriculum in 2001, and developing global awareness was advocated in high school English teaching, too. Some studies have examined teachers' beliefs and practices regarding intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education in China (Han, 2010; Han & Song, 2011; Zhou, 2011).

However, the global awareness has not been very well explained and explored in China; little prior empirical research has addressed the extent of global awareness. Though the policy-makers listed out global awareness as a key word in the curriculum, little is actually known about the teachers' beliefs and teaching practices global awareness.

This is a significant gap to explore teachers' beliefs about students' attitudes towards global awareness, global learning activities in and beyond school and school trips and exchange projects. Therefore, the present study addressed this gap by exploring the beliefs and practices regarding global awareness of EFL teachers at one senior high school in Henan province in China.

Literature Review

Recently, many researchers have showed interest in global awareness and global learning. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills designed a Framework for 21st Century Learning which consists of core subjects and themes that revolve around three core skills: life and career skills, learning and innovation skills, and information media and technology skills. Global awareness is one of the 21st century interdisciplinary themes. Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009) defined global awareness as:

- Using 21st century skills to understand and address global issues;

- Learning from and working collaboratively with individuals representing diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue in personal, work and community contexts;
- Understanding other nations and cultures, including the use of non-English languages (p. 2).

Some studies (e.g., DfES, 2005; Oxfam, 2006) of global awareness have reported the evidence that the concept of global awareness is related to the global dimension, global learning and global citizenship education. Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005) provided a framework for the global dimension in the publication "Developing a Global Dimension in the School Curriculum". The global dimension includes "eight key concepts" that include global citizenship, conflict resolution, diversity, human rights, interdependence, social justice, sustainable development and values and perceptions. The global dimension explores "the interconnections between the local and the global. It builds knowledge and understanding, as well as developing skills and attitudes" (DfES, 2005, p. 1).

The curriculum for global citizenship education was developed by Oxfam (2006). The goal of global citizenship education is to develop citizens with the knowledge and understanding, skills, values and attitudes, behavior and enable them to live responsibly in globalize world.

Oxfam (2008) has argued that global dimension (DfES, 2005) and global citizenship have most of the same key elements, just expressed slightly differently. The global dimension usually refers to the eight key concepts in education (e.g. social justice, human rights, conflict, diversity, values and perceptions, sustainable development and global citizenship) whereas global citizenship is about the outcomes in the individual (Oxfam, 2008).

In the UK, global learning is promoted by Think Global which is a membership charity that works to educate and engage people about global issues. Think Global (The Development Education Association) defined global learning (thinking globally) as education that puts learning in a global context, learning about the wider world and our dependence with it. According to Think Global, global learning (thinking globally) fosters:

- critical and creative thinking;
- self-awareness and open-mindedness towards differences;
- understanding of global issues and power relationships;
- optimism and action for a better world (Hogg & Shah, 2010, p. 2).

McCutcheon, Knipe, Cash, and McKay (2008) used a questionnaire to explore teachers' knowledge and attitudes about the global dimension in education at 11 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. Global dimension in this research can be understood through the eight concepts (DfES, 2005). The results showed that the majority of teachers agreed that it is important for pupils to learn about the global dimension in school, and three-quarters of the teachers reported that they were aware of aspects of global dimension in the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum.

DEA (2008) conducted a survey of 315 secondary school pupils in England to gather information regarding school pupils' perceptions of global issues. In particular, the survey focused on the following key issues: whether pupils are experiencing global learning in school; whether pupils feel it is important to experience global learning at school; and whether pupils believe they have an impact on the world, and whether they do take action to make the world a better place. The findings showed that half of the students had experienced global learning in school and most of the pupils believed global learning is important than in school. Findings suggested experiencing global learning at school impacted young people's attitudes to global issues in general. Two thirds of school children felt that they could do something to make the world a better place.

Ipsos MORI (2009) conducted a research to investigate teacher's attitudes to global learning and their confidence in teaching it in the UK. The sample was 3,991 maintained primary and secondary schools in England and Wales. The findings showed that teachers believed it is important to teach global learning in schools, school should prepare pupils to deal with a fasted-changing and globalized world, and most of the teachers agreed that thinking about how teaching contributes to make the world a better place motivated them to stay in teaching. However, there is a gap between "ideal" and "actual" global learning; the reason is that some teachers are not confident to teach about complex global issues.

Bourn and Hunt (2011) used interviews to explore how 12 teachers in England perceived the term "Global Dimension" and the contribution it makes to the life of their school. The teachers believed the Global Dimension has some common themes: cultural awareness, broadening horizons and equipping pupils with skills, and a values base, to engage critically with global issues. The school introduced the Global Dimension in a wide variety of ways including school assemblies, curriculum initiatives, out of school clubs and award programs.

The recent research has shown that not only teachers in the UK support global learning in

schools, but also the young people, parents, the general public and business leaders all agree with teachers about the importance of global learning (e.g., Ipsos MORI, 2008; Hogg & Shah, 2010, 2011; ICM 2011). For example, Hogg and Shan (2011) reported that parents agree that it is important for schools to help young people to think globally and be responsible global citizens.

The above definitions of global awareness have been explored by international scholars, and the importance of global awareness has been stressed in different fields recently in China, too. "Global awareness" was mentioned in fields such as politics, economics, history, geography, literature and foreign language education. Many scholars explained their beliefs about global awareness from different research fields. Though the scholars have explored the concept of global awareness, most of their research was library research, I could not find many empirical research studies, and I also could not find a unified concept of global awareness that can be accepted by most people, so it is very difficult for educators and teachers to develop it in practice. Most researchers have stated their perceptions and suggestions, but the theories of global awareness stated by them are not systematic, and their suggestions are not from actual practice. It is not easy to judge whether the suggestions are effective or accurate. Furthermore, the researchers did not show any feedback about the suggestions.

In China, some studies such as Han (2010), Han and Song (2011), and Zhou (2011) investigated teachers' beliefs and practices regarding intercultural language teaching. However, the teachers' beliefs about global awareness in the EFL class have not yet been widely researched in China. All we know until now is the importance of developing students' intercultural communicative competence and global awareness that are emphasized in educational policy and the foreign language curriculum. There is little empirical research available on the question of what are foreign language teachers' beliefs about global awareness and their teaching practices in the classroom. EFL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding global awareness still require in-depth exploration. In order to achieve this, I conducted this research through a qualitative case study.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The overall purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore EFL teachers' beliefs about their students' global awareness in foreign language learning in China. More specifically, the research addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards global awareness?
2. What global learning activities do the students experience within school?

3. How do school trips and exchange projects increase students' global awareness?

Method

The data reported here are part of my PhD study which used interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observation to explore Chinese high school English teachers' beliefs and practices about global awareness. For reason of space, here I focus in detail only on the interview data.

Context and Participants

The high school I visited is one of the best high schools in Henan province, and it has an international program. This is an ideal place to research global awareness. The high school I visited has 15 classes for each grade. Every class has about 60 students. There are a total of 24 English teachers. Every grade has about 10 teachers.

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select this study's site and sample. I chose extreme case sampling. Extreme case sampling is a form of purposeful sampling in which you study an outlier case or one that displays extreme characteristics (Creswell, 2011). I selected 17 high school EFL teachers to understand their beliefs about students' global awareness. Their participation was voluntary. I opted for a small sample site because I could interview them more deeply. As the research participants, 14 teachers are female and three are male. Their teaching experience varied. Each teacher taught two classes. Most of them hold at least a bachelor's degree.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study employed a number of different data-collection methods, including interviews, focus group interviews and documents. Chinese educational policy and foreign language curriculum related to global awareness were analyzed as document data in the introduction section. The interview data was mainly analyzed and interpreted for teachers' beliefs about the students and global awareness in this study, and the observation data of teachers' teaching will be analyzed in future research to explore deeply about teachers' global teaching practices in the classroom.

Semi-structured interviews with 17 EFL teachers of a high school in Henan province in China were conducted. The participants were from grade one to grade three. All of the 17 teachers were interviewed between 40 minutes and 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded

by IC recorder and video camera with the permission of the participants. I took notes when interviewing the participants, too. After the interviews, I transcribed the recordings into computer files and translated the interviews into English.

There were four focus interview groups in my research. The number of participants in one group was five; the number of participants in my other three groups was low at three. Though the size of a focus group usually range between 6–10 (sometimes 12) people (Dornyei, 2007; Duff, 2008), Krueger and Casey (2000) argued that small groups of four or five (which they call “mini-focus groups”) participants can afford more opportunity to share ideas and can be easily accommodated in restaurants, homes, and other environments. Furthermore, focus group interviews may vary in the number of participants (dyads with 2 people, triads with 3 participants, mini-groups with 4–5 respondents, regular groups of 8–12 participants) (Malhotra, 1996).

The participants in my focus groups were working colleagues, and they taught at the same grade, they know each other very well. Each grade has about 10 English teachers, their teaching times were varied, and the interview schedule was depended on my time and their time. It is not easy to organize most of the teachers for interview at the same time, so smaller groups were unavoidable.

Rather than imposing a theoretical framework on teachers' beliefs about global awareness, I used grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) in the study to try to build up the theory from the teachers' own voices and ideas in real life. The study was “grounded” in the interview data and classroom observation of 17 English teachers. The analysis includes three major stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. To analyze the data, I first transcribed all interviews. The interview data analysis was performed by using the qualitative software NVivo8. The data were coded into different categories.

Findings

The participants stated that their students had positive attitudes towards global awareness, and teachers enhanced students' global awareness through school trips and exchange projects. The participants indicated that their school organized various activities to develop students' global awareness. The following sections will answer the research questions one by one.

Students' Knowledge and Attitudes towards Global Awareness

The students were interested in global issues, and they had strong curiosity. They learned

global knowledge through the classroom, the Internet and media. Global learning can help students to broaden their horizons and change their stereotypes. Participants expressed students' attitudes to global awareness education in the following ways:

The students attend the international study visits just for one month, and then they have changed their views totally after coming back. I think these students had some intercultural experiences out of school. Then they could learn more during the visit study. (T1)

The students are very curious about global knowledge. When I taught global issues or showed some movie, they concentrated in the class. They are very interested in global issues. Sometimes their interests in global knowledge are stronger than in textbooks. They are very interested in the knowledge outside of the textbook, class, and school. (T7)

The students were very curious about global knowledge. They accepted global awareness very positively. Some students even imitated foreign culture. They like Christmas day more than Chinese traditional spring New Year. I think they want to accept foreign festivals. In fact, it is good to develop their global awareness. But we did not do too much global awareness education. The students would like to know and understand global culture, but they cannot put it into action, right? They like to try. (T9)

One participant from the focus group also commented about students' attitudes towards global awareness in this way:

I think they learned global awareness mainly through media communication. They are interested in global awareness. Especially they want to know more in adolescence. Though the pressure from university entrance examination limited their interests and development, they hope to develop their global awareness. (T10)

On this point, T12 commented: "As T10 said, the students have the global awareness; I think their thirst for knowledge is strong. They hope to go abroad to broaden their horizons. In fact, their global awareness is strong" (T12). Similarly, another participant said: "Through the

globalization of economy, the students know more global knowledge; they could accept global knowledge more easily than us. Maybe their global awareness is stronger than ours. Sometimes it is true" (T11).

The students have many ways to learn global knowledge and develop their global awareness. The view of student's global learning is illustrated by the following participant's comment:

The students learned global awareness through textbooks; the teacher also taught global knowledge based on teachers' intercultural experience and global knowledge. They had more channels to get global knowledge; the internet is the normal channel. Some students made net-friends. But they did not spend a long time to communicate with net-friends. You know, but I feel that they like global culture. They appreciate global culture; they developed their self-enhancement through learning foreign culture and then open their horizons. (T9)

Global Learning Activities

The global awareness activities organized by the school were: English corner, Model United Nations (MUN), research-based study, international study visits and exchange, international news, China Central News Daily, English debate, English native teacher's lesson. The main activities were as follows:

All the participants commented that Model United Nations (MUN) is an important global activity at their school. One participant described the Model United Nations (MUN) in this way:

At first the students attend MUN at our school, after the competition the most excellent students would go to Beijing University to attend the national MUN. They discussed global issues such as environmental problems and international economy at the conference. (T3)

When the participants were asked about the global activities at their schools, T6 described the research-based study in this way:

This year we do not do the research-based study, but last year, we did it for one time. Some students did very well. They found many resources. But I do not know whether they found resources based on the society practices or internet. I am not sure, but

they did good work. Furthermore, I think they presented research-based study very well, though some students were very shy. (T6)

T17 recalled the English native speaker's class two years ago:

When I taught grade one two years ago, we had the English native speakers class. We had two English native speakers. They taught one lesson every week. We had fourteen classes; every week we had a native speaker's class. (T17)

Through above descriptions of global activities from the participants, I found the school has made great efforts to push global learning activities. Some participants commented about the school's effort in this way:

I think our school has tried hard to develop global learning activities; many other schools did have MUN activities, right? The international program can stand for our school's development of global awareness. (T4)

There are many global activities. The school will organize the activities step by step. The school makes certain the activities cannot interfere with students' study. The school also encourages students to attend various activities to enrich their lives. (T15)

In fact I think our school has attached great importance to develop students' global awareness. Like T17 said just now, we had native speaker class at grade one. I think the school takes global learning education very seriously. (T16)

The most important support for global awareness should come from the school. It needs to push global awareness into action. And it also needs much time, money and energy to do it. The school should support the activities. I think it also needs the participation of every member. Every teacher should make some effort for global awareness education. (T8)

School Trips and Exchange Projects

The school organized student study visits or exchange to the UK, Canada, and Australia.

The number of the students is small. Only one student of each class can attend the program each year, and it is a small number considering the class size of 60 students. The students changed their ways of thinking and stereotypes after intercultural experience. However, the program also had some disadvantages.

Some participants also pointed out the disadvantages of student's international visit study:

They did not have too much communication in the foreign country, because the route was arranged in advance. All the activities were designed beforehand. Even taking taxis was arranged in advance. They did not have intercultural experience. They could not meet barriers and difficulties. (T4)

At present, international study visits are a normal school activity. Other activities are through teaching, the library, and reading of course. Not all the students can go abroad, only some students can attend intercultural study visits. This is the direct way for developing students' global awareness. (T12)

Discussion

Students' Attitudes toward Global Awareness

My data about students' attitudes toward global awareness showed that global learning can help students to broaden their horizons and change their stereotypes. DEA (2008) showed that global learning has an impact on students; those who have experienced global learning in school are keen to understand more about the problems in the world and believe that what they do in their daily lives can affect those in other countries. They also appear to be more open to people of different backgrounds than those who have not experienced global learning in school. My findings are in line with DEA's findings. T 1 reported that students changed their views after one month's international study visits, T 9 commented that students like Christmas day more than Chinese traditional spring New Year.

DEA (2008) also found that two-thirds of the students in secondary school in England believe there are things that people can do to make the world a better place. Half of the pupils think it is a good idea to have people of different backgrounds living in the same country together. In my research, the teachers reported that their students had strong curiosity about global issues. T 7 and T 9 both said their students were very curious about global knowledge,

they accepted global awareness very positively.

My research also supports the research findings from Ipsos MORI (2009), who found that young people want to learn more about the wider world. The great majority of students think it is important to learn about issues affecting different parts of the world, particularly how the world they live in may change. Two-thirds of 11–14 year olds think that not enough time is spent learning about the wider world in school.

Global Learning Activities

Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) suggested that the language teachers can promote the intercultural dimension even if the teachers have to follow a set curriculum or program of study and teach grammar. As Byram et al. (2002) pointed out, “Grammatical exercises can reinforce prejudice and stereotypes or challenge them”, and “One important contribution to an intercultural perspective is the inclusion of vocabulary that helps learners talk about cultural diversity” (pp. 21–22). Byram’s research gave useful implications for English teachers to develop students’ global awareness. So even in the test-centered teaching context in China, the English teachers can also develop students’ intercultural communicative competence through grammar and vocabulary practice. If the Chinese teachers can consider cultural and global dimensions, the usual grammar and vocabulary teaching and learning would be good ways to develop global awareness.

Lázár et al. (2007) discussed methods based on literature, films, and songs that can help develop intercultural communicative competence. They also gave examples of activities and projects to incorporate literary pieces, film scenes, and songs into teaching. My findings support their results of the Intercultural Communication in Teacher Education (ICCinTE) project of the ECML. The participants in my research also used literature, films, and songs for global teaching. The limitation in my research is whether or not the participants used these methods effectively and frequently. Due to the exam and limited teaching time, the teachers could not use these teaching methods for every class. I believe that the participants in my study can teach English more effectively if they can follow these guidelines in the project.

In my interview data, T 10 said the students approached global learning mainly through media communication, as well as through textbooks and teacher’s instruction in the classroom. This supports some other researches. For example, Parmenter (2004) conducted study to examine the perspectives of Japanese university students on issues related to intercultural citizenship. The findings showed that the students were influenced by their family, education,

and media like television and the Internet. My research also showed students learn culture and global issues from school education and media. These findings support the results of Han (2012) who found the most often used technique to teach culture of secondary English teachers is through textbooks. The intercultural activities regarding the skills and attitudinal dimension development are not used so much. McCutcheon et al. (2008) found the majority of pupils in Northern Ireland believed that the internet and images are the best media for teachers to use to communicate the global dimension in their lessons.

School Trips and Exchange Projects

Through the interview, the participants expressed that though the school trips and exchange projects increased students' global awareness, the program had some disadvantages. Compared with theoretical and empirical research, I found three reasons. First, the students did not have the intercultural communication training before going abroad. Second, the students did not have actual interaction with the locals. We can see from the interview data, as T 4 said "they did not have too much communication in the foreign country, because the route was arranged in advance. All the activities were designed beforehand." The teachers' comment gave a strong evidence to support Williams' (2005) research that overseas study can develop intercultural competence only if the students actually communicate with the local culture and people. Third, the number of the students is small. Only one student from each class can attend the program each year, it is a small number compared with the class size of 60 students. All of the students have the desire to go abroad to expand their global awareness, but they did not have the chance. As T 12 said, "Not all the students can go abroad, only a part of students can attend international study visits. This is the direct way for developing students' global awareness."

Byram (2002) argued that "The visit or exchange is much more than an opportunity to 'practice' the language learnt in the classroom. It is a holistic learning experience which provides the means of using intercultural skills and acquiring new attitudes and values" (p. 20). In order to help learners profit from a visit or exchange, Byram (2002) suggested a pedagogical structure in three phases including a preparatory phase, a fieldwork phase, and a follow-up phase:

- (1) In the preparatory phase, learners need to externalise their thoughts, anxieties and excitements about their visit.

- (2) In the fieldwork phase, learners are surrounded by and immersed in a new environment and learn consciously and unconsciously through all the senses.
- (3) In the follow-up phase, after return home, the emphasis should be on further reflection on individuals' experience during the visit and, by sharing and comparing, on an attempt to analyse and conceptualise what has been experienced as a basis for understanding (some aspects of) the other environment and the people who live there. One very effective way of doing this is for them to prepare a presentation of their visit to friends and family (pp. 14-15).

Conclusion

In this study I have explored Chinese English teachers' beliefs about their students and global awareness at one senior high school in Henan province in China. Through the analysis of teachers' beliefs about students' global awareness, my study showed their students had positive attitudes towards global awareness, and teachers enhanced students' global awareness through school trips and exchange projects. Their school organized various activities to develop students' global awareness.

The study was limited in several ways. The participants in the study are not all of the teachers at the school. And the voices from students have not been analyzed in the research. If I could compare the teachers' beliefs about their students' global awareness and the students' own attitudes, it could be more revealing. My further research will examine students' attitudes toward global awareness based on students' interviews and focus group data.

This study is the first step for me towards enhancing the understanding of the teachers' beliefs about global awareness and their teaching practices. Since teachers' beliefs will influence their practice (Borg, 2006), in order to understand teachers' beliefs better, their classroom practices should be studied further. In order to understand a whole concept of Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs about global awareness, a further study of teachers' global awareness beliefs should be conducted through quantitative research methods. A survey questionnaire study could be conducted to collect more participants' beliefs about global awareness. For future research on global awareness and teachers in foreign language education, we should consider the teachers' role and classroom activities.

The results of research of the students' global awareness could be provided to teachers and used to guide the curriculum and teaching in a more comprehensive way. In addition, I believe that it can help teachers to think of the concept of global awareness in addition to lan-

guage skills. It can also help policy-makers to consider the concept of global awareness from teachers' voices. The findings of my research have implications for teacher professional development, English teaching material development, curriculum design and assessment.

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